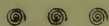


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Mary Lyon Centennial

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Mary Lyon Centennial

AND THE

Higher Education of Women.

BY

PHILIP STAFFORD MOXOM, D.D.

A Sermon preached in the South Congregational Meeting House of Springfield, Massachusetts, on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Mary Lyons' Birth, February 28th, 1897.

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The Mary Lyon Centennial

AND THE

Higher Education of Women.

This day, February 28, 1897, is the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke College for women. All over the land this anniversary is marked by tributes to her memory and by gifts to the institution with which her name is inseparably linked. Why this honor to a Massachusetts spinster who lived but fifty-two years, and gave but a dozen of those years to the school which she founded?

The woman and the deed are both immensely significant.

Today most people believe in the advantage and even the necessity of liberal education—for girls as well as boys. It was but yesterday that the major part of the people believed in broad and advanced culture only for boys and men.

It is difficult for us to realize that a little more than one hundred years ago, in the Connecticut Valley, that is now starred

with colleges for both sexes, girls sat upon the door-step of the public school-house in order to hear the boys recite, and thus gather some fragments of the knowledge that was denied them. The first public school in Boston was opened in 1635, five years after the founding of that city, and one year before the founding of Springfield, but not one girl was admitted to a public school in the whole State of Massachusetts until 1789. One year before this latter date Northampton deliberately voted that "none of the public money should be expended in the education of girls." Girls were first admitted to the public schools of the enlightened State of Rhode Island in 1822. As early as 1789, however, the public schools of Boston were opened to girls, who were allowed one half-year's tuition in spelling, reading and composition; the dangerous science of mathematics was still forbidden. In 1825 a public high school for girls was opened in Boston. It was continued only a year and a half and then abandoned. It is said that the reasons for abandoning this venture were as follows: "In the first place, the school had proved too costly; \$4,500 had been used in the trial. Secondly, it did not seem probable that the pupils would cease craving instruction within the walls except when called to marriage."

A few years before this time (about 1820) Mrs. Emma Willard, an honored name, petitioned the Legislature of New York State for aid in forming "a school for the advanced and thorough education of women;" but even she avowed in her petition "the absurdity of sending ladies to college." It has been said by Miss Kate Stevens, in an article in the *Forum* for March 1889, that Georgia Female College was "the first college devoted exclusively to women;" but this is an error. There was a movement for such a College in Macon, Ga., as early as 1835, but the College did not open till January 7, 1839, and four years later it was sold under insolvency and became the Wesleyan Female College. Its work, however, was not interrupted and it has had a career of constant and growing usefulness.

The corner stone of Mt. Holyoke Seminary was laid Oct. 3, 1836, and the school was opened with four teachers and eighty scholars on Nov. 8, 1837. During the first year the number of scholars increased to 116. At the time of Mary Lyon's death in 1849 there were fourteen teachers and 229 pupils.

Mt. Holyoke then, is the first institution founded in this country, that gave anything like a collegiate training exclusively for girls. Its course of study comprised An-

cient Geography, Ancient and Modern History, Algebra, Physiology, Botany, Natural Philosophy, English Grammar, Geometry, Ecclesiastical History, Chemistry, Astronomy, Rhetoric, Geology, Evidences of Christianity, Natural Theology, Logic, Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, and Political Economy. There were also studies in the analysis of Milton's Paradise Lost and other specimens of English Verse. Except for the omission of Greek and Latin this early curriculum compares favorably with the curricula of a good many colleges as late as twenty-five years ago, and even later.

Mt. Holyoke Seminary at its inception was the true embryo of the high grade woman's college of today. It holds its place securely as the pioneer among colleges for women. Two hundred years after the first American College for men (Harvard) was founded in New England, and when already one hundred and twenty such colleges had been founded in this country, the General Court of Massachusetts gave a charter to Mt. Holyoke Seminary. This was in 1837. In 1888, during the days of the memorable blizzard in March of that year, the Legislature amended the charter by adding to the title "Mt. Holyoke Seminary" the words "and College", and gave the college the power to confer degrees; and

in 1893 the Legislature further amended the charter, making the name simply, "Mt. Holyoke College."

Let us take a rapid survey of the progress of collegiate education for women. It will be seen that only one institution antedates Mt. Holyoke in admitting women to advanced studies.*

In 1833 Oberlin College was founded as a co-educational college, and opened with 30 women and 63 men. In 1863, thirty years later, the University of Wisconsin enrolled 75 women. Vassar College for women, founded in 1861, opened in 1865 with 353 unclassified students. In 1869 the University of Kansas admitted 29 girls. In 1870 the University of California announced the liberty of women to enter its courses, but none were received during at least the first year. In the same year the Massachusetts Institute of Technology admitted one woman to students' privileges, and seven years later (1877) opened a separate laboratory for women. Also in 1870 the University of Michigan admitted two women. In the preceding year North Western University, at Evanston, Ill., received one

*Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham was founded in 1824 and admitted both sexes, but pupils were received as young as ten years of age, and the course was not so advanced, even for older pupils, as the course in Mt. Holyoke.

woman, and in the following year (1871) Wesleyan University received four. In the same year Syracuse University received twenty-seven women; one year later Cornell University matriculated fifteen; and in 1873 Boston University opened as a co-educational institution. In 1875 Smith College for women began with twelve freshmen, and in the same year Wellesley College opened with 314 students. Harvard College somewhat grudgingly opened its courses, but not its degrees, to women in 1879 and twenty women entered the Harvard Annex, which has since become Radcliffe College. In 1885 Bryn Mawr began with forty-four students, and two years later Evelyn College, a woman's Annex to Princeton, opened with seventeen students. In recent years Brown University has also established an Annex for women, and I believe a few women have been admitted as advanced students at Yale. Union Theological Seminary in New York admits women, and a daughter of Dr. Charles A. Briggs has distinguished herself by achievements in the study of the Semitic languages.

To summarize: In 1888 there were 237 co-educational colleges and universities in the United States. In 1884 there were 230 colleges or schools of higher learning especially for women. There are today not

less than 500 institutions in which women may receive collegiate training, with an aggregate attendance of not far from 100,000 girls.

Such in sixty years, has been the vast result of the aspiration and endeavor which were incarnated in Mary Lyon.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Mary Lyon produced all this advance. The higher education of women would have come if Mary Lyon had not lived and done the work which she did. Doubtless; and the United States would have attained independence eventually had not George Washington been born. The cause of human progress is divine, and does not absolutely depend on any one individual soul. But this in no way lessens the honor due to pioneers and founders of beneficent institutions. The prophetic mind that sees the need of progress and has the heroism to dare and attempt, deserves our grateful recognition and praise.

Mary Lyon's title to honor is not doubtful and it is very great. She saw the need of enlarged intellectual opportunity for women. She felt the obligation upon her to meet in some measure the need. She had the prophetic mind, the indomitable will, the utter consecration and the immense capacity for toil and self-sacrifice which qualified her to accomplish a work that makes

her one of the very greatest benefactors of our Nation.

The story of her early life reveals her ardent desire for personal self-culture and the prodigious and successful efforts which she made to obtain it. She had the large love of her kind which made her passionately desire the same privileges for others of her sex who were environed by poverty and indifference. She had the executive ability, the persistent purpose and the physical and intellectual resourcefulness which made her equal to her task. And she had the sincere piety and faith in God which saved her at once from selfish ambition and from paralyzing doubt and fear.

There are three main characteristics of this remarkable woman which I may single out as worthy of consideration now, for their union in her character explains, in part at least, her success, and these also distinguish her as an eminent example for the young women of today.

The first characteristic was her *high aim*. She had all the instincts, passions, susceptibilities and desires of the true, well-developed woman. To a high degree she was susceptible to the attractions of a domestic life. But more clearly than perhaps any New England contemporary she saw the deficiency in the common training of girls for the spheres of home and society,

and the importance of raising the level and broadening the scope of woman's life. She had no fantastical thoughts or sentiments, but she had a very substantial conception of feminine capabilities and a profound insight into the dependence of the entire social life, intellectual and moral, on the character and attainments of women as mothers and teachers. Her passion was to create for her young sisters the opportunity and the means for culture that should develop them into strong, sagacious, upright, intelligent and religious women.

Her aim was singularly unselfish. Never was a woman more free from personal ambition in any form of self seeking. She loved her kind and to the service of her lovesubjected with unconquerable patience and enthusiasm all of her vigorous powers. To her aim she sacrificed all merely personal aids. Declining marriage, a sacrifice much greater for her than for one less affectionate and domestic, she gave her life in as pure and lofty a devotion as ever characterized a Saint Theresa, while it was much more intelligent and practically useful.

How powerfully her example appeals to susceptible and highminded young womanhood. How surely a noble aim exalts a life. She who has a high aim is lifted a-

bove the belittling frivolities in which the mere child of fashion submerges herself, and above the petty worries and sordid cares which infest the soul that has no great thoughts and aspirations.

The second characteristic was *persistence*. Seldom does one exhibit or develop so great a power of determination in the face of obstinate difficulties as Mary Lyon illustrated in the pursuit of the end which she had set before her. She was without wealth or wealthy friends. The \$27,000 which she collected for her school building were secured "in sums ranging from six cents, in three instances, to \$1,000 in but two, and there were eighteen hundred subscribers." She had to overcome the conservatism of long established mental habit which held most of the people, and which prevented any progress in the education of women beyond the most elementary grades save by constant and prolonged effort. As if this were not obstacle enough, she was confronted by positive prejudice, and, in some cases, by half scornful opposition. Yet she never fainted, never wavered, never lost faith or courage, and, better still, never lost her radiant cheerfulness. Sometimes she was severely criticised. Her incessant traveling to secure aid for her enterprise troubled her friends. The indifferent and prejudiced were not slow to find fault. Still she persevered.

"Feeling that the cause for which she toiled was the Lord's," wrote Mrs. Cowles, "she was willing to make herself of no reputation for its advancement. Certain that her feet were on a rock, she stood firm and fearless of sinking. Along with unbounded trust in God, she had a reasonable and intelligent trust in herself; and both combined to help her cling tenaciously to her darling object. So long as what she did was not sinful, she left the consequences entirely to that Providence whose agent she felt herself to be. 'What do I that is wrong?' she would say to her friends who expostulated with her on the subject. 'I ride in the stage coach or cars without an escort. Other ladies do the same. I visit a family where I have been previously invited, and the minister's wife, or some leading woman, calls the ladies together to see me, and I lay our object before them. Is that wrong? I go with Mr. Hawks, and call on a gentleman of known liberality at his home and converse with him about our enterprise. What harm is there in that? If there is no harm in doing these things once, what harm is there in doing them twice, thrice, or a dozen times? My heart is sick, my soul is pained with this empty gentility, this genteel nothingness. I am doing a great work. I cannot come down.' Thus she justified her multiplied toils, travels, and sacrifices. Though naturally desirous of human approbation, yet, if she was sure she was right, she could go forward, though her dearest friends thought she was wrong."

When the difficulties that beset her were greatest her mother wrote of her:

"Mary will not give it up; she just walks the floor when all is so dark, and says: 'Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in him, and he shall bring it to pass. Women must be educated! They must be.'"

This magnificent spirit bore her

through and over all obstacles. She *would not* be defeated, and she was not. Her career illustrates the power of the human will to achieve the apparently impossible. Indeed, it is said that men grew afraid to oppose her, for it seemed to them that what she undertook was purposed by the Lord.

It is no cause for wonder that somewhat of this indomitableness entered into the training and discipline which she applied to her pupils. It was needed then; it is even more needed now. The soft nurture of daughters in many modern homes enervates the character. Maternal coddling spoils far more fine girls than stern discipline ever injured.

The feminine nature, quite as much as the masculine, needs the heroic element in early training in order to attain to its best estate. Such training would have saved many a woman from the fickle and passionate wilfulness which now mars her character, and put in the place of it a fine, resilient firmness of will that supplies the strength which makes beauty and gentleness doubly charming and effective.

The third characteristic was her *unflinching loyalty to duty*. One of her last sayings to her school was: "There is nothing in the universe that I fear but that I shall not know all my duty, or shall fail

to do it." These words fitly garnish the modest stone that marks her grave. More than any others they disclose the deepest secret of her life. Mary Lyon was a woman of quick sensibility and great affectionateness of nature, but the regnant forces in her soul were a profound sense of personal responsibility and a sublime trust in God. These made her great. Her devotion to duty was an armature against temptation and a girdle of strength in her struggle with difficulties.

In this, too, she is worthy of imitation. We cannot easily live and labor without sentiment and affection. We need the grace of tenderness, the uplift of aspiration and the quickening glow of enthusiasm. But we need even more a compelling sense of duty. This will hold us steady under the assaults of trial; this will give us patience in the face of exasperating opposition; this will arm us effectually against the seductions of temptation to self-indulgence that beset us all.

These characteristics I commend to the girls and young women of today: a lofty aim, an indomitable will, and an unhesitating loyalty to duty. Fear nothing save that you shall not know and do your whole duty. Take to your hearts and fix in your memory that noble poem of Wordsworth's:—

“Stern Daughter of the Voice of God!
O Duty! if that name thou love
Who art a light to guide, a rod
To check the erring, and reprove;
Thou, who art victory and law
When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost set free,
And calm'st the weary strife of frail hu-
manity.”

Mount Holyoke College today, with its magnificent if still inadequate equipment, its corps of teachers unsurpassed in learning, intelligence, high principle and unselfish devotion to their work, and its hundreds of enthusiastic and loyal students, is the fulfilment and reward of Mary Lyon's aspiration, endeavor and self-sacrifice. She literally gave her life for it and to it; for, although she was physically a strong woman, she died at the early age of fifty-two years, after serving twelve years as head of the school. Had she lived but to lay the cornerstone of the building that represents so much labor and devotion and hope, she would be worthy of all honor. The twelve years of teaching and administration which she was permitted to give put the stamp of her own lofty and invincible spirit on the school, and that has remained.

There have been connected with the school since its foundation 8000 students. Over 2000 have graduated. Since 1888,

when first it received and exercised the power to confer degrees, it has honored with Academic degrees 290 students* who have fulfilled its high requirements. Among its past students are women who attained eminence in teaching and administration, medicine and surgery, and missionary service at home and in foreign lands. Others have done good service and won distinction by contributions to the literature of History, Ethics, Art, Fiction and Poetry.

The College today stands in the front rank of educational institutions both in curriculum and, especially, in methods of teaching and study. It has well-manned, perhaps I should say well-womaned, departments in Languages including the Semitic as well as the Classical and Modern, in Literature and Criticism, in Philosophy, the Sciences, History, Economics and Politics. Its discipline is firm and wholesome.

Miss Lyon introduced into her system of training the idea of practical self-help by giving to each student a share in the household work of the college home. This feature of Mount Holyoke College has been frequently and often severely criticised. For the most part the criticism has been unintelligent and unjust. When the Seminary was

*This number includes the present graduating class.

founded it was difficult to secure and retain hired domestics. The work was so distributed that it bore heavily on none of the students. This method made possible the economy that enabled many poor girls to get an education who otherwise could not have done so. The exercise was valuable as a means to the physical health of the student. It also gave to all a valuable, and in most cases a necessary, practical training. Only a foolish sentimentality will object to a training that qualifies girls to "keep house" with skill and neatness. It would be well if every young woman, whether rich or poor, were enabled adequately to care for her own home, whether the circumstances of her later life render this necessary or not. I can not do better than to quote at length from Miss Hooker's recent valuable paper on "Mount Holyoke College", in *The New England Magazine for January 1897*.

She says:—

"Miss Lyon retained the system [of domestic self-help] because of what it accomplished in the abolition of caste, in the dignifying of labor, in giving executive ability, habits of promptness and efficiency, and as a factor in the power of adapting one's self to circumstances, for which Mount Holyoke women at home and abroad have always been noted. So great has been the misconception of this idea that even today and in towns within a radius of twenty miles of the College there are occasionally found those who suppose the students are largely occupied in learn-

ing domestic accomplishments. All that Miss Lyon ever required of her pupils was seventy minutes a day which has been gradually reduced by the use of modern appliances and by help hired for the harder and less agreeable duties till an average of thirty minutes daily from each accomplishes all that is desired."

The practical administration of the College is liberal and wise, illustrated by a degree of self-sacrificing devotion on the part of the teachers that is scarcely equalled elsewhere, many of the teachers remaining at their posts though receiving material compensation smaller than most if not all of them could get elsewhere. This spirit is shared by the students. It is a noteworthy fact that though the disastrous fire of last September came at the beginning of winter and destroyed the usual comforts of living and lodging for most of them, scarcely any left the college, though in some cases they were invited to do so by their parents or friends. Right loyally they stood by the College, and made such shift as they could in the narrow, though hospitable, homes of South Hadley.

The religious character of the College has been one of its chief and most valuable distinctions. No dreamy pietism has been inculcated, nor hollow conformity, but a vigorous and bracing religion, nourished by strenuous thinking and wisely guided activity.

The claim of Mount Holyoke College upon us is large. It is in the Connecticut Valley and is the pioneer woman's College in our country. Though for many years bearing the modest name of Seminary, it has done true collegiate work from the beginning. It has not only kept abreast of other colleges for women, but has even been a leader in advanced methods of education.

It has trained, and soundly trained, more poor girls than any other woman's College. Its graduates have carried the high culture of mind and heart and conscience and will which it has imparted into hundreds of homes and widely leavened the domestic and social life of our country with the transforming energies of Christian grace and truth. This great work it has done and is doing in increased measure every year. But its needs are great. It needs additional endowments and buildings and apparatus. It needs scholarships and fellowships. Its needs are especially urgent now because of the loss by fire.

How shall we best celebrate the centennial of Mary Lyon's birth? How shall we most fitly honor her memory and acknowledge the debt we owe her for her noble work? By prompt and generous gifts to the College which she founded and into which she builded her faith, her intelligence and her life.

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